

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 333 994

PS 019 647

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TITLE Children's Attachment Classification and Parental Divorce as Predictors of Their Understanding of Marriage and Divorce.
PUB DATE Apr 91
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Seattle, WA, April 18-20, 1991).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attachment Behavior; Comparative Analysis; *Divorce; Elementary Education; *Elementary School Students; Grade 2; Grade 4; Kindergarten; Kindergarten Children; *Marriage; Nuclear Family; Parent Child Relationship; Predictor Variables

ABSTRACT

The possibility was explored that children's attachments to their mothers may provide an internal working model for their cognitions of marriage and divorce. Subjects were 112 children in kindergarten, second, and fourth grade who were living with nondivorced or divorced parents. The mean length of time since parents' separation and divorce was 56 months and 39 months, respectively. All subjects were white and middle-class, and all were interviewed individually at one of four public elementary schools. Data were collected with an assessment of the mental representation of the self in relation to attachment (Cassidy, 1988) and a semi-structured interview that asked children about marriage, divorce, remarriage, and stepparents. Analysis of covariance showed a significant main effect for parents' marital status and a significant interaction between representation of the attachment relationship and parents' marital status. Children living with nondivorced parents whose representations of the self in attachment were classified as insecure were more likely to focus on superficial behaviors of spouses, stepparents, and stepchildren than were children whose representations were of secure attachments or whose parents were divorced. (Author/RH)

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Children's Attachment Classification and Parental Divorce
as Predictors of Their Understanding of Marriage and Divorce

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Paper presented at the biennial meetings of the Society for
Research in Child Development, Seattle, Washington, April 1991.

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ABSTRACT

Children's attachments to their parents may provide an internal working model for their cognitions of marriage and divorce. Subjects were 112 children in kindergarten, second, and fourth grade living with nondivorced parents or divorced mothers. Measures were: a) an assessment of the mental representation of the self in relation to attachment (Cassidy, 1988), and b) a semi-structured marriage and divorce interview that asks children about marriage, divorce, remarriage, and stepparents. An ANCOVA showed a significant main effect for parents' marital status and a significant interaction between representation of the attachment relationship and parents' marital status. Children living with nondivorced parents whose representations of the self in attachment were classified as insecure were more likely to focus on superficial behaviors of spouses, stepparents, and stepchildren than children whose representations were of secure attachments or whose parents were divorced.

BACKGROUND

Using a sample comprised of children from both divorced and nondivorced families, this study explored the connection between children's representation of their relationship with their mother and their understanding of marriage and divorce. While children with divorced parents are more likely to experience divorce in their own marriages (e.g., Mueller & Pope, 1977), developmental psychologists have paid little attention to children's family experiences as mediators of the quality and stability of their future marriages.

That children's attachments to their mothers may provide an internal working model for their cognitions of marriage and divorce is supported by:

- 1) the assumption of attachment theory (e.g., Bowlby, 1973, 1980; Main Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985) that a person's childhood relationship with the mother is particularly influential for the development of an "internal working model" of other close interpersonal relationships;
- 2) longitudinal studies that suggest connections between the quality of infant-parent attachment relationships and social interaction with peers (e.g., Erickson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 1985; Waters, Wippman, & Sroufe, 1979);
- 3) numerous parallels between infant and adult romantic attachment (Shaver & Hazan, 1987; Weiss, 1982); and

- 4) research that suggests that adults with different attachment orientations entertain different beliefs about romantic love (Hazan & Shaver, 1987).

HYPOTHESES

1. Children who view themselves as participating in a secure relationship with their mother will express greater understanding of marriage and divorce than children with representations of an insecure attachment relationship.
2. Children with divorced parents, having grappled with parental divorce, will express greater understanding of marriage and divorce than children with nondivorced parents.

METHOD

SUBJECTS

Subjects were 112 children (ages 5 years 1 month to 10 years 5 months) in kindergarten ($n = 30$), second ($n = 43$), and fourth grade ($n = 39$). Sixty-three (56%) of the subjects were girls, and 49 were boys (44%). Eighty-one (81) children lived with their nondivorced parents. Thirty-one (31) children with divorced parents lived either with their single or remarried mothers. The mean length of time since parents' separation and divorce was 56 months and 39 months, respectively. All subjects were white and middle-class, and were interviewed individually at one of 4 public elementary schools.

MEASURES

Incomplete Stories with Doll Family (Cassidy, 1988). This measure assesses the extent to which children view themselves as participating in a secure relationship with their mother as an attachment figure. Subjects are asked to complete six short stories using a doll family and a doll house. Two stories deal with potentially emotionally charged and relationship-acknowledging interactions between child and mother. Two are about conflict within the family, primarily the mother. The final two stories are concerned with conflict or with a threat from outside the family. Two coders classified the stories as secure/confident, insecure/avoidant, or insecure/hostile. The modal classification was used as the summary score, and interrater reliability averaged 94%. Because there were only 9 subjects whose stories were coded as insecure/hostile, the two insecure categories were combined.

DOLL STORIES CLASSIFICATION

1. Secure/confident. The doll protagonist is described as valuable and worthy, and the relationship with the mother is important, special and warm. There is open negotiation and a sense of fairness in the mother-child relationship, and an ability to turn to the mother in stressful situations.
2. Insecure/avoidant. The doll protagonist is isolated or rejected, or the mother-child relationship is not mentioned. Conflicts are denied, as is the need for help; the child resolves conflicts alone.

3. Insecure/hostile. The doll protagonist is involved in violent and bizarre behavior, and the relationship with the mother is disorganized.

The Marriage and Divorce Interview. In reference to a story line illustrated with paper dolls, children are asked both open- and close-ended questions about 5 main themes. The themes were marriage, divorce of a childless couple, divorce of a couple with 2 young children, remarriage, and stepparents, both as social institutions and as possibilities for the subjects, and the reasons, benefits, and disadvantages of these marital situations.

Subjects' responses were content analyzed by two coders and assigned to one of 6 levels of understanding, ranging from superficial to abstract, that best described the statements. The sum of the 5 theme subscores was the measure of understanding of marriage and divorce. Interrater reliability was 93%.

LEVELS OF UNDERSTANDING OF MARRIAGE AND DIVORCE

- Level 1. Little or no understanding. The subject's responses were predominantly "I don't know" or nonsensical.
- Level 2. The child with superficial observations. The subject consistently described marriage and divorce in terms of obvious physical details, expressed feelings, and showed understanding of some divorce-related changes.
- Level 3. Transition level between Levels 2 and 4. The subject's responses sometimes showed Level 2 reasoning and sometimes concrete Level 4 understanding
- Level 4. The practical child. The subject's responses were practical and concrete. The child emphasized everyday activities, such as fighting, earning money, doing chores, and raising children.
- Level 5. Transition level between Levels 4 and 6. The child's reasoning sometimes was psychological Level 6. However, about half of the responses were described as Level 4.
- Level 6. The child as mini-psychologist. This subject consistently took the perspective of child and spouse and had perceptive, abstract, and psychological responses.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Chi-square analyses indicated that there was no difference in the frequency of attachment classifications between children from nondivorced and divorced families and between girls and boys.
2. A 2 (attachment classification: secure and insecure) x 2 (parents' marital status: nondivorced and divorced) analysis of covariance, controlling for age, did not show a main effect for attachment classification in predicting children's understanding of marriage and divorce.
3. There was a main effect for parents' marital status; children with divorced parents expressed more complex and practical reasoning about marriage and divorce than children with nondivorced parents, $F(1, 107) = 4.21$, $p < .05$.
4. However, this main effect was qualified by the significant interaction of attachment classification and parents' marital status, $F(1, 107) = 6.70$, $p = .01$. Post-hoc (Scheffe) comparisons indicated that children with both representations of insecure attachment and nondivorced parents expressed less complex understanding of marriage and divorce than children with representations of secure attachment or children with divorced parents (see Table). It is possible that either the experience of parental

divorce, or that of a secure attachment with the mother, predisposes children to construct a more elaborated and abstract understanding of marriage and divorce than children with neither of these two family experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

1. For children lacking the additional experience of parental divorce, interactions with their mother in a close and secure relationship may lead to a greater understanding of marriage and divorce. These children may apply what they have learned about that attachment to their conceptions of other close relationships, as well as actively seeking out and remembering information about other social relationships.
2. For children without personal experience of parental divorce, representations of an insecure relationship with the mother may lead to more superficial understanding of marriage and divorce. Insecure internal working models of self and other may trigger defensive processes that prevent these children from learning and retaining relationship information.
3. For children who have had the security of their family challenged by parental divorce, the experience of the secure relationship with the mother may be lost.

Doll Stories Classification Interacts with Parents' Marital Status to Predict Children's Understanding of Marriage and Divorce, Controlling for Age

Attachment Classification	Parents' Marital Status	N	Adjusted Mean Total	SD
Secure	Married	56	17.01 _a	3.70
Secure	Divorced	21	16.60 _b	2.88
Insecure	Married	25	14.07 _{a,b,c}	4.91
Insecure	Divorced	10	17.63 _c	5.12

Note. Means with common subscripts differ significantly at the $p < .001$ (a) and $p < .01$ (b,c) and levels.

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